



"And it never failed that during the dry years
the people forgot about the rich years, and during the wet years
they lost all memory of the dry years. It was always that way."

—John Steinbeck
East of Eden

The Challenge

Drought occurs somewhere every year in the United States. It can and does extend over long periods and large areas, and it brings hardship.

After a major drought, it is common to study the causes and impacts. The resulting large body of literature on this subject has many similar themes. Two of them are especially relevant to the work of the National Drought Policy Commission:

- ☀ As a citizenry, we must remember the lessons learned from past droughts and act on them to prepare for the next drought.
- ☀ The federal government must decide how to coordinate its more than 80 drought-related programs and how to integrate them with ongoing nonfederal drought programs and the efforts of individuals.

Unless and until these basic steps are taken, this country will likely continue to rely on taxpayer-funded emergency relief after drought and then forget to prepare for the next drought.

In 1998, Congress passed the National Drought Policy Act, which created the National Drought Policy Commission and challenged us to recommend a better way.

The Response

We met the Act's challenge. First, we developed a national drought policy statement with preparedness as its foundation. We ask Congress and the President to endorse this policy through a National Drought Preparedness Act. Second, we outlined a course of action that includes a preparedness initiative to help reduce the damages and costs of drought. Third, we envision a nonfederal/federal partnership to ensure that federal drought programs are better coordinated, that they are better integrated with nonfederal programs, and that their services are more efficient and effective and driven by customer needs.

It will take commitment and resolve to achieve the goals of national drought policy. We therefore call on the President and Congress to provide sufficient resources to carry out the recommendations in this report. Allocation of funds should be based on consideration of the costs and benefits associated with drought preparedness, proactive mitigation, and response measures.

Studies show that the federal government spent \$3.3 billion responding to the 1953-1956 drought, at least \$6.5 billion during the 1976-1977 drought, and about \$6 billion during the 1988-1989 drought. The Commission contends that we can reduce this nation's vulnerability to the impacts of drought by making preparedness the cornerstone of national drought policy.
